ISSN: 1941-0832

RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

Teaching Black Lives in College When Black Lives Didn't Matter that Much K through 12

by Sarah Trembath

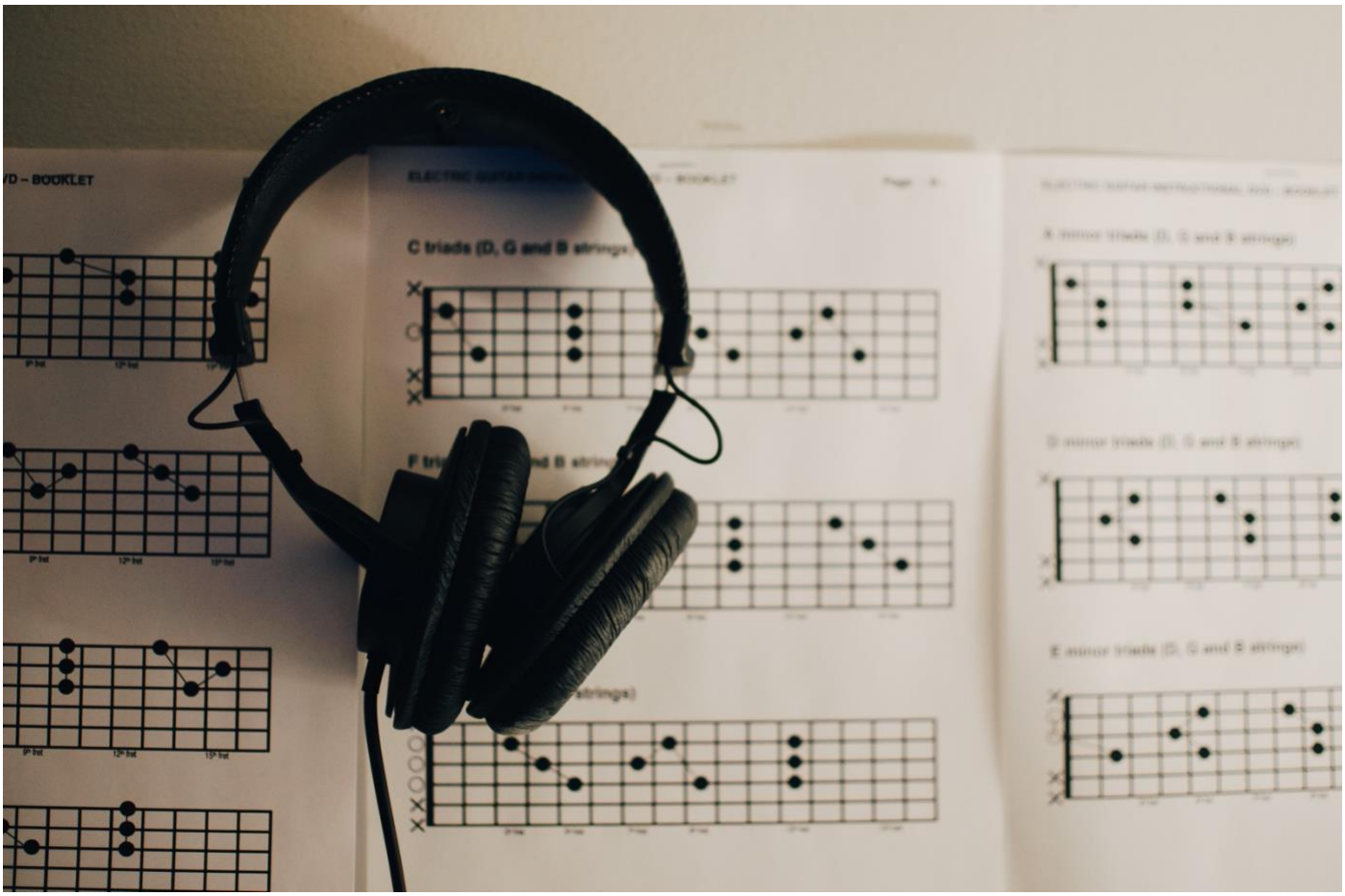

PHOTO BY AIDEN MARPLES ON UNSPLASH

The Ivory Tower and the 'hood. The outside and the middle. Privilege and poverty. Knowledge and ignorance. The truth and a lie. Dichotomies as extreme as the colors black and white. Sometimes my profession has me both skating and crossing these lines, considering how to do so with my dignity and my students' needs simultaneously central in the decisions I make as a teacher.

Teaching Composition, Teaching Black Life

I teach composition and the occasional literature class to undergraduate students. My university's composition program is a rigorous and pedagogically driven one in which my colleagues and I draw our classroom and curricular practices from the rhetoric and composition scholarship and from each other's experiences. We design and teach writing-intensive, subject-based topics courses. We also design and teach courses in our university's core areas of required classes: C*omplex Problems, Critical Thinking, Habits of Mind,* and *Diversity and Equity*. And we teach first-year writing. When we teach first-year writing, especially, we are readying students to do the work that will help them succeed throughout the rest of college. We are also helping our students think about things. If we are really doing our jobs well, it occurs to me often, our students come out on the other end of our courses thinking well about the things they write about, rather than just writing well. Sometimes those things relate to race and racism or, more specifically, to Black lives.

In the first class in the freshman series, students do a lot of that thinking about a community text. A committee in our department selects a book from among recent nonfiction publications that address current issues of importance. All incoming students read the book—which, more often than not has some relationship to race or class—and then they attend an author talk, discuss the book in class, research some topic related to it, and write about some aspect of that topic. From there, throughout the semester, students do other projects. In the process, they locate and evaluate sources, read critically, think critically about what they've read, and synthesize ideas, take positions and formulate complex theses, develop those theses with well-supported argumentation, make choices in the modes of persuasion they employ, organize and reorganize their work, incorporate source materials, cite properly the sources they've used, and so on. They continue this development of skills in their second-semester course, Writing 101.

For this latter course, professors select our own topics and themes. My colleagues and I get to share an aspect of our own research. We get to spread a personal passion or at least tap into an interest. Students, too, get to tap into their own preferences. Presumably, they choose their 101 classes based on which topic intrigues them the most. In any given semester, the range of choices is vast and may or may not touch upon race and class dynamics. Topics, for instance, include feminism and gender, monsters, science fiction and technology, intimacy in the digital age, criminality, illness, dystopian media, TaNehisi Coates, country music, service learning, and Hip Hop scholarship. My offering has long been the Hip Hip course.

That course has had many versions—*Hip Hop Poetics, Hip Hop Scholarship, Golden Era Hip Hop*—but all treat the subculture as worthy of serious study and rich with areas of exploration for students' research-based writing. It's a popular class, with long waiting lists and people talking about it on and even off campus. After all, it has primary source material like Queen Latifah's "Ladies First" and Eric B. and Rakim's *Paid in Full* on the syllabus. It's got cool book titles like *Prophets of the Hood* and *Black Noise* on the required reading list. The first assignment on the schedule is often, "Watch Lupe Fiasco's 'Bitch Bad' and, using text support from the lyrics and the video imagery, take a position on Fiasco's charge against the modern music industry. Sustain an argument in support of your position for 5 pages." Students think it sounds like fun.

Of course, I'm engaging all this material toward the goal of developing good academic writers. I teach in a manner that meets the course objectives. But I'm also, in many ways, *teaching Black Lives.* That is, in my Writing 101 Hip Hop class, and at times when our first-semester material has anything to do with race, racism, or Blackness, I am essentially *teaching* Black Life in addition to teaching composition.

In my first-semester course, race and class figure in heavily: If the community text has a progressive race/class bias, I find myself in the role of teaching history to provide understanding for my young students. If the community text is problematic, I put it in conversation with texts from minority-group thinkers who can better explain their own situation. Because my own research area and advanced degree are in Black studies, more often than not, those thinkers are Black.

In Literature, too, race and class play big roles. For me, the canon is expansive, and I make sure I include writers who not only have a range of origins and identities, but also a plurality of perspectives. At the multiracial, predominately White elite university where I teach, the material is almost always unsettling to someone or is, even more problematically, beyond the life experience and worldview of those I ask to interpret it. My teaching style often has me feeling, then, like I'm straddling two worlds, trying to blend them, creating good anti-racist pedagogy (specific to both Black studies and college writing), but doing so by trial and error. In the Hip Hip Studies writing classes in particular, I feel like I have succeeded in helping my students meet the primary goals of the class, but only half succeeded at whatever it is that moves non-Black people forward in their thinking about Black lives. The challenges to this latter, unofficial objective are many.

In my Hip Hop Studies writing courses, the aesthetics of the primary source material has been primarily Black. Historical and cultural contexts have been primarily Black. The scholarship and documentary films to which I expose my students—most of whom are neither racially Black, culturally urban, nor multicultural in their communities of origin—were almost always created by Black scholars and filmmakers. But my students aren't always prepared to talk

or write about Black lives or about the lives of the Latinx and working-class White artists who were also instrumental in creating Hip Hop culture. And so I turn for pedagogy to the cultural critics of Hip Hop scholarship and the thinkers in my [Black literary] tradition who've helped me understand the racial moment in which I live by making America's racial, political, and cultural history clear. Though, for the most part, they predated Hip Hop, people like James Baldwin, the Black Arts Movement writers, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, David Walker, DuBois, Fanon, Césaire, Manning Marable, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Walter Rodney, and Barbara Smith, among others, prepared me in many ways for the problem of teaching Hip Hop outside of Hip Hop's predominately Black urban context. For when one teaches Hip Hop on Hip Hop's own terms, one is teaching the history of the oppressed people of the world. One is teaching how those oppressed people express their genius in forms and with language instantly recognizable to their cultural kindred but usually foreign to outsiders. In the face of all that may oppress them in their communities of origin, Hip Hop artists are, to a larger degree than was intended for them, the agents of their own destinies and the tellers of their own stories. They create out of their own culture and arise out of their own history—a history that the Southern Poverty Law Center would call "hard history." That is, their narratives contain things that are often hard for outsiders to stomach.

Hip Hop in its purest forms represents the periphery in a world with other things and other people at its center. But Hip Hop Studies—that brief semester or two in which students in the academy can study primary sources that were tagged on city walls, rapped over beats, and worked out on the dance floor—puts Black urban life at the center. Students writing on it must interpret it on its own terms if they are to be basically accurate about what they say, let alone astute and insightful in their analysis and argumentation. Thus, the periphery becomes the core, and its narrative escapes. Stark, often unspoken truths about the world in which we live come to light.

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Hip Hop, as Black socialist historian Manning Marable said of other things, speaks truth "that reveals the true roots of massive exploitation and human degradation upon which the current world order rests" (Marable 3). "The word 'periphery' and capitalist 'core' share a common history," he writes. Thus, the voiceovers in Brand Nubian's "Meaning of the 5%" can make students of privilege at an elite university uncomfortable: "The poor have been made into slaves by those who teach lies," the voice says. "They are witnessing conditions in the world that are produced by real men, but they don't see the real cause of the effect of their own suffering," the song begins (Brand Nubian).

Race/class-privileged students of Hip Hop learn about the housing projects where the dances began and the rows of abandoned buildings where the visual art flourished. They also learn about the exploitative practices of record companies in their sky-high towers who courted young rappers and gave them shady record deals. And if they listen closely, perhaps to the opening track by Yasiin Bey (formerly known as Mos Def) on his acclaimed *Black on Both Sides* LP, students hear the echoes of the past from which the obvious wealth binaries arose:

My grandmomma was raised on a reservation
my great-grandmama was, from a plantation
They sang, songs for inspiration
They sang, songs for relaxation
They sang, songs, to take their minds up off that
Fucked up situation
I am, yes I am, the descendant
Of those folks whose, backs got broke
Who, fell down inside the gun smoke
chains on their ankles and feet
I am descendants, of the builders of your street
tenders to your cotton money
I am hip-hop
I am rock and roll
Been here forever
They just ain't let you know
I said, Elvis Presley ain't got no soul
Chuck Berry is rock and roll
You may dig on the rolling stones
But they ain't come up with that style on they own
Elvis Presley ain't got no soul
Little Richard is rock and roll
You may dig on the Rolling Stones
But they ain't come up with that shit on they own

Students hear the song's bare rhythm that evokes the chain gangs of yore, and they study the lyrics that assail White heroes and claim the birthright of a music tradition accurately, but rarely, attributed to Black genius. "Elvis was a hero to most, but he never meant shit to me," as Public Enemy says.

Not surprisingly, I get mixed reactions to this material when I teach it. But I keep on teaching it. Entire worldviews, and their ancestral and immediate origins, express themselves through Hip Hop artists, and I insist that students know as much about such things as they can before they begin writing about them. Whether it's Lupe Fiasco teaching the ugly history of Blackface minstrelsy or the new trap rappers actually "dancing the jig," as it were; whether it's Queen Latifah rhyming in front of video clips of South African freedom fighter Winnie Mandela or any number of more recent artists dripping in the bling mined by South Africa's underclass, artistic genius and hard history are there side by side.

It's not uncommon for students to enter my Hip Hop Studies writing class without a solid K-12 education on any of the things Fiasco, Latifah, and other nation-conscious

rappers like Bey describe. If their primary and secondary teachers used commercially produced textbooks without presenting counter-texts, they likely know a national history of near-perfect patriarchs and neatly resolved national crises. (See James Loewen's *Lies My Teacher Told Me* and other textbook bias analyses cited in Trembath 2020.) But this is not the history of the periphery, which becomes core in a Hip Hop Studies class. The details of the physical abuse that kept Bey's ancestors in chains, the apartheid of the first nation reservations to which he alludes, the conscripted labor and early prison-industrial conspiracy that replaced enslavement, and the flowering of Black genius—despite all the rest—in the roots of rock and roll, rap, and other artistic genres are often brand new to my students.

It is common for them to enter with a fondness for today's commercial rap music, with its propensity toward embarrassingly degrading representations of Black life, and a feeling as if those images explain and accurately represent Black people. As Black lesbian feminist socialist literary critic Barbara Smith once wrote about the outsider's gaze on Black women, many of my students have "a specialized lack of knowledge" (Smith 20) concerning Black urban life. When they write from that vacuum, they write stereotypes: *Black people equate with urban poor. "Urban poor" equates with criminality. Braggadocio and battle lyricism equate with arrogant hypermasculinity and violent aggression. And violent aggression is innate and never performative* —like it is in cowboy movies, mafia shows, war flicks, and heavy metal videos. In rap, according to those of my students who have been fooled by the performative identities of so many thugged-out rappers, rap-star posturing arises from the real-life criminality of performing artists. As a result of my students operating from positions of "not knowing" (Smith 20), they sometimes write their freshman papers based on stereotypes and misunderstandings. "Men in the black community don't stay with their families or treat women well," I sometimes read. "Black men can't show their feelings," I've read once or twice. Student-writers sometimes bind themselves to those not-knowing stances and indulge labelling fallacies, circular logic, and in-group biases to support those stances. "Black men die violent, unnatural deaths because they come from a culture of murder," according to one student who appeared to be White but later confessed that he *is* Black and spent his time on campus passing for White.

It's a lot sometimes. I find myself letting a tiny bit of "not knowing" go but mostly working hard to correct it, pedagogically preempt it, address it in some way as if, by correcting the paper, I am correcting the real-life problem of anti-Blackness in all its many forms.

Smith, in her essay "Towards a Black Feminist Criticism" that first appeared in a 1978 issue of *Radical Teacher,* demonstrates how, as Black academics in the trenches among Others, we must create and adapt pedagogy to bring humanity, truth, and dimension to Black life. Hers was a scathing critique of the White feminist and general male disregard for and misinterpretation of the work of Black women writers and a call for Black feminist critique of Black women's work that even four decades later serves to remind me why this otherwise joyous work of mine is so fraught. "For whites," she says harshly but not mistakenly,

> their specialized lack of knowledge is inextricably connected to their not knowing in any concrete or politically transforming way that Black women of any description dwell in this place. Black women's existence, experience, and culture and the brutally complex systems of oppression which shape these are, in the "real world" of white and/or male consciousness, beneath consideration, invisible, unknown. (Smith 20)

Most of my students don't know us. They don't know our men. How do I teach the material? How do I get them to write from a position of understanding?

Like urban Black men in my Hip Hop classroom context, Black women, for Smith, had long been "double nonentities" (21) under the gaze of the White male Other. It was obvious to her that a "Black women have been viewed critically by outsiders" and so there was a "necessity" for a Black feminist criticism to correctly interpret the "state of Black women's culture and the intensity of *all* Black women's oppression" (Smith 20). Our lives needed *us* to interpret them. Smith made that the standard. She rejected the margins, moved herself and her folk to the center, and demanded that anyone speaking of her kind—i.e., viable, skilled, Black female literary writers who rendered their lives on their own terms—be competent to interpret the material. In this spirit, I too stand in the gap, and I offer my students the work of all those who have stood in the gap for Black lives. In Hip Hop Studies, that may be Tricia Rose, Imani Perry, Robin D.G. Kelly, Crystal Belle, KRS-One, or any of the many others whose scholarship on our art form provides a proper lens. And my students devour it. Lightbulbs go on.

So why do I still read so many stereotypes?

"Hip Hop is important because African Americans never had a voice or any writers to say what they think," I read in a paper. "Black men rape more," I read in another. I describe the literary history. I provide the crime stats. *Am I scaffolding a skill—teaching research-based writing—or trying to scaffold worldviews? Is it even possible to teach Black Life well to Others outside the community or the experience? Is anyone doing this work well? This feels like shit.*

The problem of teaching Black life, especially Black urban male life in my experience in predominately White comp and lit classrooms, is that it feels urgent but somewhat impossible at the same time. It sometimes feels like a downright Sisyphean task to open their minds to the complexity and three-dimensionality of Black urban men. The men who populate Hip Hop are often "viewed very critically by outsiders" in the academy. They are odd "nonentities" that are somehow simultaneously mythical, revered, mistrusted, and despised. The students who stereotype them the most in their writing resist lessons that contradict the notions they hold. They often appear hesitant to learn about the "brutally complex systems of oppression" that many in the Black urban male identity dramatize in their art. These men's real lives must be "beneath consideration, invisible" to students entering my classrooms with anti-Black, often subconscious biases. Thus, my classroom becomes the "space needed for exploration" of truth. I open it up for that purpose as I move things along toward the

official college comp goals. *But am I asking too much of my students? Am I taking too much on?*

As I redefine those goals and search for strategies in meeting both sets of objectives, my successes become pedagogy, and my failures become frustration and reason for better pedagogy. Smith's work in pioneering a viable literary criticism for Black women writers illuminates obstacles in my own attempts to sustain a dignified, focused, and true comp class that draws its reading, viewing, and listening material from Black life. Smith's work makes me feel less alone. It sets precedent for going back to the drawing board again and again and building the principle that Black life matters enough to be interpreted with accuracy. Students must be challenged to know when they know something and enter the rest with inquiry instead of certainty. Professors teaching Black lives in communities where Black life may not have mattered before our classroom, then, must take the time to provide historical and cultural context for students, must teach critical thinking, and must devote ourselves to finding and honing our own best anti-racist practices as they arise in our classrooms. We should also make time for self-care, take breaks from the work, and tune into how others are doing similar work.

The *Sankofa* Ethic and Critical Thinking

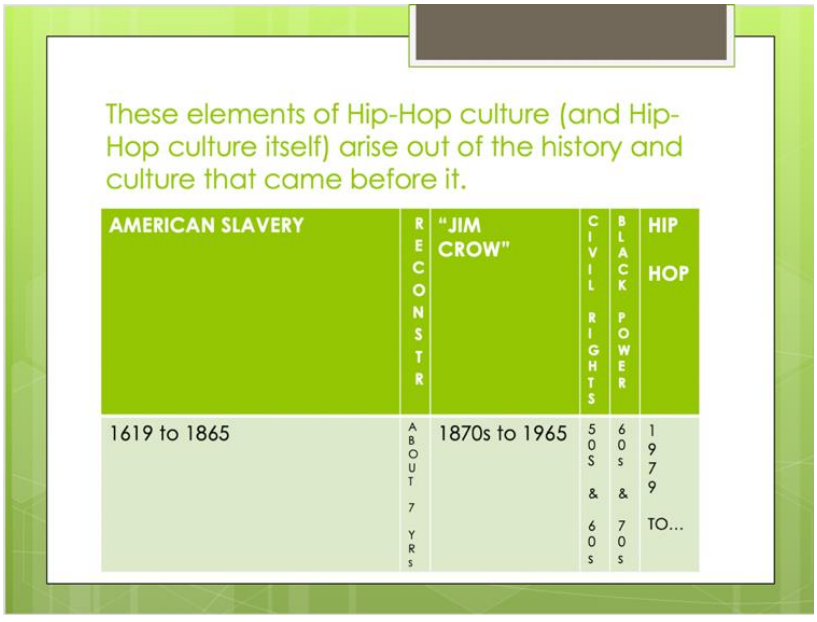
When I teach the literature and/or lyricism of people of color, I approach each subtopic with the *sankofa ethic* central in my thinking. *Sankofa* is an Akan/Ghanaian ethic emphasizing the "wisdom of learning from the past to build for the future" (Willis 188). People invoking this ethic understand the importance of going "back to the past" (Willis 189); they understand the danger of forgetting. The Western notion most closely associated with *sankofa* is *historicity,* which could be described as (a) an awareness that everything is situated in time and history and (b) an expressed appreciation of origins and influences in anything that one might study. Historicity is philosophical and intellectual, and *sankofa* is spiritual and cultural. I doubt that it matters which concept an educator holds in mind; it matters only that s/he contextualizes lessons in the history that grounds them.

Even though compositionists like myself concern ourselves with theses and text support and citation, we also concern ourselves with factual accuracy and insightful analyses. We can't assume our students know what we need them to know in order to research and write with accuracy and empathy on traditions other than their own. It could be tempting to put aside the historical contextualization—after all, that duty should fall on teachers of subjects like history and sociology. But many—if not most—US students emerge from Eurocentric secondary educations with deep biases (Trembath 2018), and *sankofa* is an ethic; as such, it requires all non-history teachers to go above and beyond what we may ordinarily do.

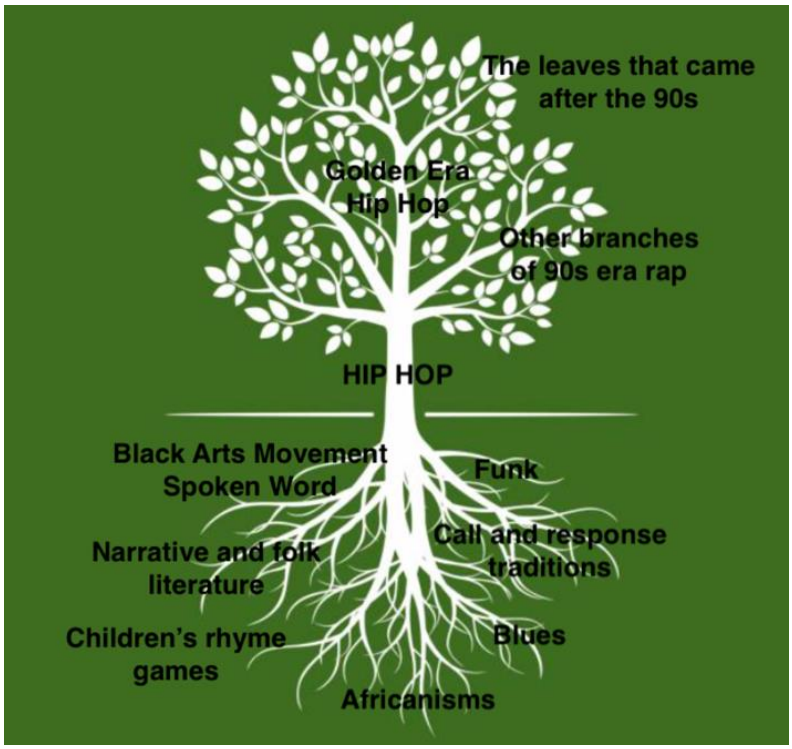
In order to assess what my students already know about topics central to our first-year text series or a given literary text, and therefore what I may need to reach back for in order to teach them, I have them access their prior knowledge about a given racially significant topic. In my first-semester course, for example, before selecting counterbalancing material to this or that first-year text, I've had to ask them to free-write about the labor history of the American South; about certain countries in Africa and Asia; and about the history of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. When it comes to the Hip Hop class, I have asked what they know about Black history, the Black vernacular, Black art, and even about the drug trade so often referenced in Hip Hop songs. In all but a very few cases, students knew next to nothing about any of those topics before they approached their first-year texts. (Interestingly, students educated abroad knew more on all of these subjects.) The *sankofa* ethic requires that these stereotypes and gaps in knowledge be acknowledged and addressed.

It can feel like this practice takes time away from course objectives. But, as Smith wrote, for texts to be understood, "they have to be talked about [and] examined in such a way that the basic intentions of the writers are at least considered" (Smith 20). This is as true for graffiti painters, dancers, emcees, deejays, producers, and fashion designers as it is for literary writers. And so in Hip Hop, I may teach LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's entire *Blues People* in order to enable my students to understand the basics of Black art: how jazz improvisation predates freestyling, how blues narratives and bad-man folk tales evolved into rap narratives and gangsta rap posturing, what Africanisms remain in Black American culture, and so on.

Sometimes, in the interest of time, I make very simple graphics to compress enormous amounts of material into a one-class teachable back-lesson. Here's one on all of Black American History:



Here's another I used to contextualize today's Hip Hop in its root forms.



I also began requiring a midterm exam with basic concepts on which a student is required to score a B or higher in order to be allowed to write the paper at all. Bad scholarship can take the form of "barely disguised cultural imperialism," according to Smith (21). It constitutes what she might've called a "racist flaw" (22), and I don't want my students writing it. So my midterm contains those things that one must know to be competent to discuss the topic. Students start their research and writing projects much more informed than they did when I operated from my own misassumptions on what they already knew.

I also make sure that, in addition to historical and cultural foundations, I support non-Black/urban students in developing critical thinking skills as they approach Black life from the outside. I would like them to think analytically about race and class by getting them to question presumptions and ask questions that lead to better understandings and therefore more sophisticated writing. I pull ideas from the many works of Richard Elder and Linda Paul (2020) on critical thinking and apply them to faulty thinking about Black life in a way that enables me to discuss racist ideation without accusing the student of "being racist." I introduce these ideas—critical questioning, egocentrism, and sociocentrism—on the first or second day of class, and then I refer back to them when students present misassumptions as certainties or interpret aspects of a culture foreign to them from their own cultural lens:

1. Critical thinkers ask questions. Students who are falling back on stereotypes are beginning with answers instead of inquiries. Studying questioning methods can help us lead students away from certainties based in unexamined racial biases (Elder and Paul 2005).

2. Critical thinkers examine their own thinking for egocentric and sociocentric biases After I teach some of Elder and Paul's basic ideas on metacognition and good thinking (as a precursor to good writing), I can challenge students without confrontation when I encounter racism in their work. I can point to one of Elder and Paul's charts and engage students in questioning about egocentric and sociocentric thinking. I might then ask, "How much of this came from your life experience (or culture) instead of the material? What might you find that challenges your own assertion if you research this idea?" and encourage them to develop what Elder and Paul call "open-minded inquiry," "valuable intellectual traits," and "universal intellectual standards" (Elder and Paul 2020).

I feel I made good progress with these basic practices and a few others that arose organically out of my trial and error over the semesters.. And most students learned how to write for college. Their critical thinking and analytical skills often improved as well. And many came away with a body of knowledge about an important subculture that they hadn't known much about before my class. After these lectures and the history lessons, some non-Black students tell me things like, "I had no idea Hip Hop was this deep." Others, especially Latinx and Eastern European students, tell me of the origins of the folk traditions in their communities and how those have similar roots in resistance. I realize I've built some bridges. But others continue to resist and retain stereotypes: A 19-year-old former boarding school student from suburban Connecticut once told me that KRS-One was "exaggerating" about police brutality in one of his anthems about police violence, "Sound of Da Police."

"Can we give him the benefit of the doubt of knowing what's going on in his community?" I asked. I explained then about emcees as griots and writers as eyewitnesses. But the student remained unconvinced.

I couldn't get the conversation out of my mind, even when I went home. I wondered what this kid would be in life, how he would treat us when he encountered us in his life.

Conversations like this grew increasingly tiring over the years, and they started staying with me when I went home. I found it emotionally exhausting to keep correcting and preempting. "We refuse social justice projects which require us to frontload a lot of learning or consciousness-raising," write Tuck and Yang (qtd in Rodriquez 6). Looking back, I can see why they would.

Sometimes I got close to veering too far from my job description in attempts to keep meeting their strange assertions with learned and heartfelt counters. I found

myself surprised to realize that it exhausts and saddens me when I, in my own unchecked thinking, failed to transmit a culture, a history, the lived experience of others into each young mind that sat in my classrooms. Those times when the racism continued to flow through the papers I graded wearied me. It began to feel "overwhelming to break such a massive silence" (Smith 20) on the full humanity of Black urban men. And so, in April of 2018, I decided it would be my last Hip Hop studies freshman writing class. "I am filled with rage," Smith wrote (20). "They have yet to struggle with the deep racism in themselves that is at the source of this blindness."

A New Practice

Early in my teaching career, the Black and anti-imperialist world literature I'd studied at my HBCU alma mater was energizing and inspiring to my students. But they were Black, Latinx, and working-class White high schoolers. What I taught felt validating to them. When I transitioned to academia and began to teach Black lives in predominately White and very expensive schools, it was also exciting sharing this material, opening minds, and getting great work from engaged students. The stereotypes came through from time to time, but they felt occasional. Helping students correct flawed thinking in their writing (for all racism is, at the very least, flawed thinking) felt like a challenge that I enjoyed rising to meet.

But as the years wore on and the political climate of the country changed, it began to feel far more difficult and stressful. A few times I shed tears of frustration. When I taught Hip Hop, I was sharing a love of mine from a culture that I adore and belong to, and so those sentences equating Black men with criminals and using terms like *Black* interchangeably with *poor* and, from there, *violent* and so on, just started to feel like daggers. Sometimes it felt like the lens on lives of people of color was unbearably constant, and the floodlight was harsh. It felt clear, as cultural activist and Black writer Toni Cade Bambara once said, that I was a soldier in "the war… being fought *over the truth*" (17). But I felt like I was losing: *Why couldn't I dislodge the stereotypes, interrupt the faulty thinking, and protect myself from the harm that came when I read papers prejudiced against my own kind?*

In the midst of emotional exhaustion, I was experiencing, I attended a few faculty meetings on campus in which people in administrative positions shared illuminating data that taught me something about my students' lives, something which helped me hold on to the affection I have for them while struggling through the muck. In one, an administrator shared with faculty data demonstrating that an overwhelming number of our incoming students report growing up in communities that they referred to as populated "entirely or almost entirely by people of my same culture." For non-Black students, how much *could* Black lives have mattered in their communities and educations?

I learned in another meeting—in which the same data from that first-year student survey was also presented—that students who reported feeling like they "belonged" on campus were far more likely to be White. Many Black students reported feeling like they "don't belong" on our campus. A lot of this tension about the ownership of academic space, academia, and knowledge itself was playing out in the papers I received, and I was trying to set it all right—all in time for that big paper at the end of the semester.

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I attended yet another meeting in which my colleagues in the School of International Studies spoke of their classes on cross cultural communication, and I thought, *for many of my students this is a skill they do not yet have.* There was an unspoken competency that I was expecting or trying desperately to provide, though they simply weren't ready. They, and I too, needed reeducation before meeting one another on the borderland of race in higher education.

I've read quite a bit of antiracist educational scholarship in the last year—A. Suresh Canagarajah, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, Anneeth Kaur Hundle, Asao Inoue, Frankie Condon and Vershawn Ashanti Young, and others—and I've grown. But the portion of it that I found most convicting is that which has shone light on the nature of the *insistence* that was driving the emotional energy of my teaching. Diab et al. (31) note that antiracist "self-work with others [needs] to be reflective, dialogic, and affective, as well as ongoing." Their description of this work invokes pacing and patience and interchange and acceptance. "This work cannot be a one-time deal," they write. It requires "ongoing self-work, courageous dialogue, and the willingness to be disturbed" (Diab et al. 31).

Marsellas, whose "Off Scaffolding and Into the Deep End" I discovered recently in *Radical Teacher 115,* unsettles me further. He writes that the multicultural model of university teaching promotes "coexistence and understanding" (14) and treats empathy as if it "follows from identification and similarity" (14). But he claims that full knowledge of such a complex topic as those explored in the literature of marginalized writers is impossible for many students, and socially just ends are better served by what he calls "deep-end teaching" (14), which "dismisses the supposed need for common ground." It instead "asks students to establish a certain level of comfort with radical difference" (14).

"Within a multicultural scaffolding model," on the other hand, "a professor's invitation for students to speak on volatile subjects without mastery [may look like] we have set an elaborate ideological trap" or are feeding insecurity "about *[students'] ability to master knowledge of a subject position they don't occupy"* (Marsellas 16; emphasis mine). This latter expectation is so clearly what I was doing, was so hard for me to see, and has been so long in coming that it's

utterly "meta," as my students would say: a teacher takes a long time to see something problematic in her approach to mastering a skill working with other people taking long times to see what is problematic in their approach to mastering their skill.

I find, in approaching this likely solution, that I don't want to be a teacher of "Black Men are People Too" through Hip Hop lyricism. I'm equipped to "frontload a lot of learning or consciousness-raising" on Racism 101, which Marsellas eschews, but I'm not sure I'm temperamentally equipped for deep-end teaching. If I was, I'd have to study Marsellas very closely, as he was onto something with me. But the adjustments I made last year likely brought me right back to my professional center, a place where I won't likely find myself teaching much "Basic Black Life". My life is already filled with the obstacles and frustrations racism presents.

In my classrooms, I continue to put texts in conversation with one another—problematic Eurocentric texts with Black and other minority perspectives, Black texts with historicizing material—and still approach my lesson planning with the *sankofa* ethic and critical thinking principles at the fore. But I have a new home for my Hip Hop Studies class and a new topic for my freshman topics course. That is, I now teach an upper-level literature class on just two Hip Hop emcees, instead of a first-year writing class on the whole genre, and I now lead my second-semester freshmen in a high school history book rhetorical analysis intensive.

Because Black Lives truly do matter, Hip Hop Studies is worthy of higher-level classes in which I can require prerequisites and expect certain competencies. In this new incarnation of my class, I can slow down the pace and make the whole course about the material instead of using the material as a springboard for research and writing projects. The students and I have room to breathe, discuss, ruminate, question, explore. The students—and the real lives under scrutiny—deserve it.

My first-year students, on the other hand, are now exploring bias in educational materials like the ones they had in high school. They study actual high school textbooks and read James Loewen, Howard Zinn, Carter G. Woodson, and other pioneers in questioning foundations of knowledge and bias in education. I lead them in rhetorical reading strategies, and they choose a "traditionally marginalized community" (e.g., women, LGBTQ, Indigenous, Latinx, working-class White, and Black people) and make their own discoveries with the reading methods. I'm about to enter my second semester of teaching it, as the pilot class went well enough. There was a bit of what students called "freaking out," as they uncovered the rampant spin doctoring of history. But it wasn't *my* freaking out, and I found myself leading students through the muck with a greater degree of comfort. It seems they feel well led, and I feel better suited for this method.

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